

## Five people to invite onto every search committee *--and two to avoid*

**by Sam Pettway and Kathy Bremer**

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**S**ince the founding of BoardWalk Consulting in 2002, we have worked with scores of nonprofit and foundation CEO search committees. The vast majority of the CEO search committees we serve are charged with identifying, attracting, vetting and recommending a final candidate to become CEO of their respective organizations. The final hiring decision always rests with the full board, of course, but we have never had a board reject its search committee's recommendation.

Clearly, the CEO search committee is a critically important arm of the board.

There are many protocols governing the establishment of these committees, and we intend to address many of them in future articles. The ideal size, the meeting frequency, the pros and cons of taking formal notes, respect for confidentiality, even the form of the search committee's mandate are topics of much interest. Surely an early key to the committee's success is the choice of individuals asked to serve on the committee, and thus we'll tackle this issue first.

Two cautions before we share our views with you:

- One, every nonprofit CEO search is unique in its own way, and yours will differ in some fashion from the last we conducted or the next one we undertake.
- Two, committees are made up of people, and people are full of surprises. We've seen individuals who meet none of the criteria below make exceptional search committee members, and we've seen some who meet every criterion prove to be ineffectual.



Across the spectrum, however, here are five players we recommend for every search committee:

## 1. A potential chair

Serving as chair of a CEO search committee is a key responsibility. It need not be as time-consuming as many people fear (especially if you are assisted by a capable executive search firm), but the chair will set the tone for the entire process. How the search committee chair executes the role will have an outsized impact on the way the committee addresses its work and the way it reaches consensus at the end of the process.

A chair who leads with a hand that is too heavy or too light can result in a fractured committee with unheard voices, undeveloped opinions and unaired agendas. A committee chair comfortable balancing discussion with decisions will yield a different result from a chair who races through the agenda in pursuit of a fast conclusion or one who emphasizes process at the expense of progress.



A logical choice for search committee chair is an individual in line to serve the organization as a future chair of the board of directors. The choice need not be limited to the immediate next chair of the board, although that choice has the obvious advantage of continuity.

Depending on the length of time remaining in your current chair's term and the succession pattern prevalent in your organization, the perfect search committee leader might be someone who has strong potential to be chair two terms out (i.e., the successor to the current chair's expected successor). Such a choice will give the trustee an opportunity to sample his or her appetite for broader engagement while giving board colleagues a full taste of the individual's style of board management.

The relationship established between final candidate and committee chair during the search process can be most helpful during the transition to new leadership and beyond. From the candidates' perspective, whether the search committee chair is *the* next board chair or a future possibility, the selection is important, as the chair will serve as a de facto mentor to the new executive once hired.

In most circumstances, we discourage the chair of the board from serving a dual role as head of the search committee. Not only will you limit an opportunity to strengthen the organization's leadership with a key board assignment, but you also run the risk of limiting the committee's perspective and reach from the outset. And if public perceptions are important, as they increasingly are, a buffer between the search committee and the board chair can help minimize any concern that the committee is merely doing the chair's bidding.

By the way, board chairs routinely serve with distinction as nonvoting members of the search committee, an approach we embrace.

## ***2. The keeper of the culture***

Many nonprofits in transition to a new leader face the challenge of honoring and leveraging their heritage while not being overly constrained by that heritage. Said differently, in most mission-driven entities there is much about the old culture and ways of doing business that should be maintained, just as there are inevitably some things that may need to change under a new leader.

It is critical that an organization's heritage be well represented on the search committee. By this, we do not mean the organization should remain stuck in its past but rather that a respect for first principles—for the organization's defining reason for being—should help inform the committee's deliberations. This can be achieved by the addition to the committee of a long-serving (or even former) board member with no other formal role in the organization, but it should be someone who has a deeper-than-average institutional memory.

## ***3. The futurist***

Fundamentally, of course, your search is for a CEO or Executive Director who can lead you to a new future, ideally consistent with a vision of that future already embraced by the board. Of course, the committee as a whole should embody the future your organization is headed towards, but ideally at least one member of the committee should be



someone whose view of that future stretches the consensus of what's possible.

Assuming everyone is working in good faith, our experience is that search committees rarely get off on a tangent, and a willingness to test prevailing expectations—as basic as where the best candidates are likely to come from and the roles they might be currently playing—can benefit the search committee's deliberations in unexpected ways. In committees of six to eight members (our preferred size), such a voice can help ensure you don't settle for the easy answers.

#### **4. *The processor***

The pending change to new leadership is a perfect time to examine some fundamental assumptions about the way your nonprofit conducts its business and the sort of leader its future requires. Some board members are tempted to jump to the answer—"Joe would make a great CEO" or "We've got the best #2 in the world in Samantha; why do we need to do a search?"—before the committee or the full board have had a chance to understand the questions that need to be addressed.

We think there is enormous value to a thoughtfully executed search process, even if the outcome is the promotion of an internal candidate. To reinforce the value of the process, there ought to be at least one search committee member known for attention to basics, to fundamentals, to detail, the kind of person who can say "Are we getting ahead of ourselves here," "Have we addressed such-and-so fully," or even "Are we so enamored by [the candidate's] personality that we're overlooking some basic gaps in what we said we needed?"

#### **5. *The entrepreneur***

Many entrepreneurs are frustrated by the decision-making processes of nonprofit boards, as the collaborative nature of nonprofit decision-making fights the buck-stops-here style with which they run their own businesses. The entrepreneurs on your board can serve many useful functions on the search committee—they will push you to keep the process moving, they will value decisiveness over discussion, and they will likely have a risk profile different from that of their colleagues.

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We acknowledge that the categories above are somewhat arbitrary, and that we could easily slice the issues differently.

For example, depending on the nature of the core business of your nonprofit or the focus of your foundation, a subject matter expert might be a useful addition to the team; that is, someone who genuinely understands the ins and outs of what you do for your constituency, and the impact various changes in approach might mean. Other search committees might choose to take a more functional view, making sure that finance or marketing or resource development is well represented on the committee charged with recommending a new CEO.

The basic point is that there is power in diversity on your search committee. Many boards struggle with—or settle for—diversity in race, gender or ethnicity. We think the truly important complement to the process is achieved by embracing diversity of *perspective*.

Whatever the demographics of your constituency, the breadth or focus of the issues you hold dear, or the changing dynamics of your operating environment, a diverse search committee can be a powerful asset to help ensure that more voices are heard, more viewpoints honored—and more compelling candidates will be attracted to the opportunity at hand.

## ***And the two to avoid?***

We think it a grievous error to have **the current CEO** or **any future subordinate** as a working member of a CEO search committee.

Current employees of the organization certainly have a special perspective to impart to the search committee, and their input should certainly be sought early in the process, but they have no role as a part of the formal committee, and they should not be encouraged to think otherwise. The trick, we believe, is to give them a voice in the process but neither a seat on the committee nor a vote in the selection.

When we interview departing CEOs and the management teams they have built, we learn things about the organization—its appetites, aspirations and limitations—that are available from no other discussion partner. Such discussions also give us a real-time view of the strengths inherent in the team the new CEO will inherit, a factor always of interest to potential candidates as they get deeper into the process.

To include any from this group as members of the search committee itself, however, strikes us as a fundamental conflict of interest, as it inevitably

dampens the candor needed in search committee deliberations while putting the employee in an awkward if not untenable position. Accordingly, we always recommend against it.



***Moods of my Muse, textile art by  
Judy W. Loope, from BoardWalk's collection***

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***Sam Pettway, Founding Director, and Kathy Bremer, Managing Director, are colleagues at BoardWalk Consulting, a firm committed to "building strong foundations for nonprofits"® through executive search, board enrichment and strategic facilitation.***

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